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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 002058

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP FOR ANDREW MACDONALD
EMBASSY AMMAN FOR MANU BHALLA
OES FOR AARON SALZBURG
USAID FOR CHRIS KISCO

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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [SOCI](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: WATER RESOURCES FALL AS WATER SCARCITY RISES ON
NATIONAL AGENDA

REF: A. SANAA 1692
[1](#)B. SANAA 813
[1](#)C. 08 SANAA 1176

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Water remains a socially threatening, yet politically sensitive subject in Yemen; government action has stagnated as water resources continue to decline. The lack of regulation of drilling rigs and the cultivation of qat are largely responsible for the continuing decline of water resources. The lack of water has resulted in water riots in the governorates of Aden, Lahj, and Abyan. Water scarcity has health consequences and has been linked to a dengue fever outbreak, as people hoard water in Taiz. While the donor community continues to warn ROYG officials of the danger of water scarcity, there is no one clear partner in the Ministry of Water and Environment and its associated agencies. Water scarcity is rising on the national agenda and was the subject of a recent cabinet meeting. Despite discussion at the cabinet level, the ROYG has taken little action to approach the issue of water scarcity. End Summary.

WATER STILL SCARCE

[1](#)2. (C) Water remains a socially threatening, yet politically sensitive subject in Yemen; government action has stagnated as water resources continue to decline. The Minister of Water and Environment Abdulrahman Al-Eryani characterizes the problem as "insidious" and the biggest threat to social stability in Yemen (REF A). According Eryani, there are more conflicts over water than land in Yemen. Indeed, water protests occurred in the governorates of Aden, Lahj, and Abyan at the end of August, as people gathered together to demand water and accountability from officials, as reported by Yemen Times. The August 22 water riot in Aden involved hundreds of city residents, rallying against a water shortage in three districts. Eryani described the riot to PolOff on September 16 as a "sign of the future" and predicts that conflict between urban and rural areas over water will lead to violence.

[1](#)3. (U) Despite the ROYG having a comprehensive environmental law and a National Water Strategy, enforcement of the law and implementation of policy remains a challenge. A large part of the problem is that Yemen has over 900 rigs for drilling, largely unregulated by the ROYG. Drilling rigs, in fact, are subsidized and exempt from custom duties. While the ROYG's water law is one of the best in the region, according to Eryani, it cannot be implemented without controlling the rigs. An alternative to regulating the rigs is to nationalize them, which would cost \$100-150 million. Because of illegal rigs, 14 out of 16 aquifers are depleted in Yemen.

Eryani said that the Sa'ada aquifer is in the worst condition and the lack of water is one of the causes of the conflict, although no one is talking about it. Governorates particularly affected by water shortages include Sana'a, Aden, Abyan, Lahj, Taiz, and Sa'ada.

14. (U) The water scarcity situation is only projected to get worse as the population increases and agricultural use of water, particularly in the production of qat, expands. (Note: According to Eryani, 85 percent of water is used in agriculture and up to 50 percent is used in the production of qat alone. End Note.) Yet the effects of water scarcity will leave the rich and powerful largely unaffected. Fathi Fahem, an influential businessman, told EconOff that counter to Sana'a city regulations, he had drilled his own personal backyard well to a depth of more than 800 meters. Hamid al-Ahmar jokingly told EconOff in August of his rivalry with next door neighbor BG Ali Muhssen al-Ahmar regarding their competing wells, which drain the same Hadda water basin. (Comment: These examples illustrate how the rich always have a creative way of getting water, which not only is unavailable to the poor, but also cuts into the unreplaceable resources. End Comment.)

DENGUE FEVER OUTBREAK LINKED TO WATER HOARDING

15. (U) Water shortages have led desperate people to take desperate measures with equally desperate consequences. Residents of Taiz are hoarding water, keeping it everywhere in their homes in open containers, providing breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying dengue fever. As of October 4, there

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were 176 confirmed cases of dengue fever in Taiz, according to Dr. Abulhakeem Ali Al-Kohlani, Director General of Control and Surveillance at the Ministry of Public Health and Population. Kohlani told EconOff that this outbreak is unfortunately not a new event. Since 2003, there have been cases of dengue fever in five governorates, and the outbreaks have been particularly concentrated in the capital. The incidence of dengue fever is rising as more people store water in their homes in an attempt to prepare for impending and inevitable water shortages. So far, there have been no deaths from this untreatable disease, for which there is no vaccine, Kohlani told EconOff on October 5. Given a sharp increase in severe cases, which must be hospitalized, the Yemeni health system may face capacity issues in treating affected individuals.

NO CRYSTAL CLEAR SOLUTION TO SHORTAGES

16. (C) The problem of water scarcity is multifaceted and murky and the solution is far from streamlined. While the donor community continues to warn ROYG officials of the danger of water scarcity, there is no one clear partner in the government to address water issues. In fact, the Ministry of Water and its associated agencies appear to be getting only weaker in terms of resources and capacity. Ali Kassim Manshalin, Senior Program Officer at KFW Development Bank, told EconOff on September 15 that all the qualified people have left the Water Ministry. While Minister Eryani understands the issues, he is powerless to change policies, particularly since the vast majority (85 percent) of water is used in agriculture and controlled by the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

17. (C) In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation is often at odds with the Ministry of Water and Environment, as the Agriculture Ministry focuses on the supply side of the equation, while the Water Ministry focuses on the demand side. Propped up by diesel subsidies, which allow farmers access to water pumps in order to irrigate their qat fields, the supply side tends to dominate. Removing diesel subsidies would make water use more

efficient, as many farms would no longer be sustainable, but would also be potentially politically destabilizing as the poor would be greatly affected. The discovery of a new aquifer near SAFER (oil company) on the way to Mukalla is used as a fallback strategy for ROYG officials from both ministries.

18. (C) Water scarcity is rising on the national agenda, and was the subject of the October 20 cabinet meeting. The ministers of Water and Agriculture are working together in at least one instance and have written a joint letter to President Saleh opposing the plans for a new dam in al-Kharad. According to Eryani, Saleh is passionate about dams, believes that the ancient Marib dam is a "sign of civilization and prosperity," and thinks that Yemenis could achieve the same heights if they build a similar dam in al-Khared, 65 kilometers northeast of Sana'a. (Comment: The Marib dam was a diversionary structure, not a storage dam like the proposed al-Khared dam. Due to evaporation, the al-Khared dam would become a large salt lake, defeating its original purpose. End Comment.) In general, dams are often built without long-term plans and opposed by the donor community, said Manshalin to EconOff.

19. (C) Although the Water Ministry and its associated agencies remain disjointed organizations without much power, helping the ROYG find a solution to the problem of water scarcity remains a major goal of the donor community. The introduction of modern irrigation may be a viable option; a World Bank study determined that just by using drip irrigation, water efficiency could rise from 30-35 percent to 70 percent. Implementation of this program is estimated to cost USD three million and would save 14 million cubic meters of water per year. Just by using modern irrigation, farms could be 25 times more efficient. Moreover, modern irrigation is a one-time investment, has an immediate effect, and is sustainable.

COMMENT

110. (C) Yemen continues to suffer from bad public policy in dealing with the intertwined relationship between water scarcity, agriculture, and public health. The recent water

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riots in Aden, Lahj, and Abyan and the outbreak of dengue fever in Taiz could be a sign of the future. Due to ROYG inefficiencies, the population is left to obtain water, by hook or by crook, by hoarding water or by digging deep, illegal wells. Despite discussion at the cabinet level, the ROYG has taken little action to approach the issue of water scarcity. In the face of water shortages, Yemenis in affected areas will continue to store water at home or may be relegated to rallying in the streets due to the lack of service. End Comment.

SECHE